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ABSTRACT

Prepared under Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, this 1969 document outlines the scope and nature of a K-12 program designed to meet the educational needs of the rural disadvantaged youth of Leflore County, Mississippi. It is noted that the young people of this county are products of rural poverty, with 83% of the non-white and close to 49% of the white population having annual family incomes below $2,000. The nature of learning experiences needed in the curriculum for these students is described in terms of (1) establishing goals and values which the students understand and accept, (2) achieving an understanding of their cultural heritage, (3) acquiring the skills necessary for participation in the culture, and (4) acquiring and making a specialized contribution to society. The work to be done in each curriculum area is discussed with specific suggestions. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (AN)

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Volume IX

The Curriculum
Grades 7 Through 12

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Basic Concepts in Planning
The Curriculum for Grades Seven Through Twelve, Leflore County Schools

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Introduction:

Central to the achievement of the objectives stated in the Title III Planning Proposal is "the development of a comprehensive, integrated and articulated compensatory and therapeutic educational program K-12." The purpose of this report is to sketch in broad outline the scope and nature of such a program designed to meet the educational needs of the youth of Leflore County. The development of the details of the program, of necessity, will have to be a major part of operational aspects of the project, and they will change as the culture changes and as personnel operating the program gain new insights and skills through experience, in-service education, research and continuous evaluation of the on-giong program.

The Educational Needs of Youth in Leflore County

The educational needs of youth do not exist in a vacuum and neither can they be discovered "under the skins" of individual youths. They are determined by the nature of involvement of the individuals concerned in the culture of which they (the individuals) are a part. In a functional sense educational needs represent the skills, concepts, knowledges, and general competencies, and values necessary for individuals to achieve and internalize to make it possible for them to participate as "fully functioning individuals in the culture (way of life) of which they are a part."

Competent analysis of the youth in America today[1] indicates that through education all youth need assistance in:

1. Achieving a system of values and positive and realistic self-concepts which they can accept as guides to action.

2. Achieving an understanding of their social, economic, political, and scientific (cultural) heritage.
3. Acquiring the skills necessary to participate effectively in the culture, and
4. Acquiring the competencies and dispositions to make a specialized contribution to society.

The program (curriculum) of the school must provide experiences deliberately designed to meet these interrelated needs. For the youth of Leflore County this requires a unique and highly innovative (in relation to conventional programs) curriculum:

Leflore County Youth

Among the approximately 8000 children and youth in the schools of the county, grades 1-12, approximately 7000 are non-white. Eighty-three percent of the non-white and close to forty percent of the white population have annual family incomes below $2000.00 Clearly, except for a very small percentage, the youth of Leflore County are the products of rural poverty. Such poverty has been

> ". . . characterized by isolation, physical hardship, lack of many of the benefits of even an 'old-fashioned' industrialized society (such as plumbing, heat, and adequate transportation), extremely poor schools, and a general atmosphere of hopelessness."[2]

Except for the fact that great strides have been made in the last few years in improving schools, this quotation accurately characterizes the environment ("life space") of an overwhelming majority of the youth of Leflore County. And most of the school program improvement of recent years has been improvements more closely related to the characteristics and needs of the small

minority of the non-poor. Hence, they have had little impact on the lives of the poor, and the drop-out rate of the youth of the poor is excessive.

The youth produced by the environment of the rural poor are likely to be psychologically alienated, matricated by survival values only, fatalistic in their concept of reality, and negativistic in their concepts of self and others. They are generally deficient in skills associated with cognitive learning, in the achievement of personal identity, and in psycho-motor skills associated with a technological society.

By way of contrast the youth of the small percentage of non-poor in the county do achieve a sense of identity and a feeling of personal worth and adequacy. They succeed in conventional school related tasks, and go on to equip themselves for the specialized opportunities provided by the new mechanized agricultural economy of the local area, or for the demands of the technologically oriented culture outside Leflore County. While their concepts of themselves are generally positive, and their motivations are generally more consistent with "the main stream" of American life, their concepts of the poor (people who differ significantly from them) are generally unrealistic and negative. In a way they, too, are alienated from a significant segment of the culture of which they are a part, and the conventional school program with its emphasis on academic proficiency in isolation from social reality tends to perpetuate this alienation and bifurcation of the poor and non-poor.

Scope and Nature of the Curriculum Needed

As indicated earlier, American youth, including the youth of both the poor and non-poor in Leflore County, need assistance through education in:

1. Achieving a system of values and positive and realistic self-concepts which they can accept as guides to action.

2. Achieving an understanding of their cultural heritage.
3. Acquiring the skills necessary to participate effectively in the culture, and
4. Acquiring the competencies and dispositions to make a supecialized contribution to society.

These educational needs are interrelated, but each area requires types of experiences for youth specifically designed to meet the characteristics of the needs in the area involved. Moreover, these experiences must be relevant to the specific perceptual "life space" of the youth for whom the experiences are designed. In what follows an attempt is made to describe in general terms the nature of the experiences (content) needed in the curriculum for the youth of Leflore County.

1. Area 1 - Achieving a system of values and positive and realistic self-concepts.

Experiences in this curriculum area should be designed to involve youth in responsible and intellectual confrontation of their own reality. Under the leadership of qualified personnel, the students will study their own situations and prospects; identify and examine the values which matricate their behavior; develop more consistent values which they understand and can accept as adequate guides to more intelligent and productive behaviou; and establish realistic and achievable goals for themselves (both immediate and long range). Among other things this area of the curriculum will include opportunities for students in age-grade groups too:

1. Participate responsibility (on the basis of careful study and discussion of the issues involved) in determining policies and developing procedures for regulating student behavior and relationships in the school and community. Such participation provides realistic opportunities to gain experience and insights in responsible citizenship. Moreover, successful experience in such activities has a positive impact on the

development of self respect and respect for others (so often missing in the youth of the poor).

2. Identify significant problems which are of concern to them, study the problems, and develop plans of action for intelligently dealing with them. Problems to be considered should be those which are real and compelling to the youth of Leflore County. Possible problem areas include health and nutrition; developing and/or finding desirable and enriching recreational activities and resources; value conflicts involved in peer group standards and adult standards; the conflicting beliefs and values of different socio-economic cultural groups; and such issues of concern to youth as civil rights, the draft, juvenile delinquency, and protest demonstrations.

3. Study occupational career opportunities which show promise for both immediate and long range career development; become aware of the demands and potential rewards of the various occupational groups; and the kinds of competencies needed by individuals for success in the various occupations, and begin establishing career goals for themselves.

4. Analyze their own educational status and needs in terms of their immediate and long range goals, and

5. Develop individual and group plans of action designed to meet the needs identified in 4 above.

Self study and evaluation, and active involvement in planning one's own educational program consistent with realistic goals and needs is a continuous phase of this curriculum area.

2. Area 2 - Achieving an Understancing of their Cultural Heritage:

Individuals can participate fully and meaningfully only in a way of life which they understand, and to which they are consciously committed. Hence, all youth need experiences designed to assist them in gaining as much understanding as possible of their cultural heritage--all aspects of the way of life of the society of which they are a part. Children and youth of the rural poor are seriously handicapped in this respect because of the extremely limited content of the sub-culture which they experience (isolation). The broader, more deeply human aspects of the total culture are beyond their comprehension because of their limited experiences. For the non-poor their experiences of the richer aspects of the culture are often fragmentary, and seldom "intellectualized" or internalized as understandings of a meaningful way of life. And they (the non-poor) usually are protected from experiences which would make them aware of the realities of the kinds of lives lived by the poor.

The content of experiences to be provided in this curriculum area is designed to broaden the experiential base of both the poor and non-poor in the many facets of the total cultural heritage, and to assist them in gaining a broader intellectual understanding of the basic principles and values which under-gird the culture.

The content should be inter-disciplinary in nature drawing upon ideas from the disciplines of the social sciences, humanities (including literature, the arts, folklore, music, etc.), and basic concepts from the natural sciences. The content of the area should be related as closely as possible to concepts and ideas that are familiar to the students from their own background, and expanded to include new ideas and concepts. Field trips to governmental offices, museums, art centers, laboratories and other social and cultural centers will be incorporated in the area.

Films, film-strips, television and other comparable and appropriate media will be utilized.

3. Area 3 - Acquiring the skills necessary to participate effectively in the culture.

It is common knowledge that by the time they reach high school youth vary widely in their levels of mastery of such basic skills as speaking, reading, writing, and simple computation. Typically the culturally disadvantaged youth is 3 1/2 years, or more, below grade level in reading, and is comparably retarded in other areas involving conceptual skills. Most of the youth in Leflore County fall in the category of the disadvantaged, and available test data indicate that they are seriously retarded in these basic skills areas. At the same time among the non-poor there are also some who are retarded, some who are at grade level, and others above grade level.

Clearly, for those who are below grade level in skills mastery (the great majority in Leflore), the school curriculum must include systematic experiences designed to assist youth in reading, speaking, writing, and computational skills improvement. For the culturally disadvantaged this is necessary to make it possible for them to participate in society beyond the narrow confines of the self-culture of the disadvantaged. For the non-poor it is necessary to make it possible for them to succeed in further education.

The work in this area should be closely correlated with the content of areas 1 and 2. It should be conducted on a small group and/or individual basis, by a staff especially qualified for this work.

4. Area 4 - Acquiring the competencies necessary to make a specialized contribution to society.

In grades seven and eight in this area the work will be explanatory in nature, giving the youth an opportunity to become familiar with many kinds of interests

and work, and to test their capacities and interests in a variety of activities. From grade nine through high school the students will be encouraged to begin special preparation for entry into the world of work, or for further education leading to technical and professional careers.

For the majority of the youth in Leflore this area will include courses designed for those planning to enter the various trades, such as auto mechanics, cabinet making, the building trades, agricultural machinery operatives and mechanics and others; for those planning to enter careers in the distributive occupations such as sales clerks; for those planning careers in what has come to be called mid-management such as shop foremen, office managers, etc.; for secretaries, stenographers, etc.; for those interested in careers as technical and semi-technical workers in industry and business; and for those planning careers in various service occupations such as practical nursing, beauticians, barbers, etc. Cooperative work-study programs should be made available as widely as possible.

For students whose interests, capacities, and goals require further education leading to professional careers, this curriculum area will also include courses specifically designed to equip them for success in college. For some this will include "remedial work" in some of the skills areas as well as formal "college preparatory" courses in the various subjects. For others, it will include advanced study in subjects for which they are prepared, with the possibility of equipping them for advanced placement in college. In the courses in this curriculum area the emphasis on the "structure of the disciplines" which is common to the "new curricula" will be encouraged.

It will be possible for some students to take work from both the occupational preparatory, and the college preparatory groups, depending on their interests, goals, and abilities.

Organization and Grouping of Students and Faculty for Instruction

Conventional practices in grouping students in schools are inappropriate and inadequate to the task of providing adequate educational opportunities for the disadvantaged. Ability, and other forms of homogeneous grouping tends to perpetuate the isolation and feeling of hopelessness experienced by disadvantaged students outside of school. Heterogeneous grouping on a strict grade level basis often ends as achievement grouping, with achievement in areas that are relatively "foreign" to the lives of the disadvantaged, and hence, also perpetuates isolation, hopelessness, and negative self concepts in the disadvantaged. As Thelen' puts it the problem is "How can the resources of teachers and students be utilized more effectively for educational purposes...?"[3]

In the foregoing it is proposed that the curriculum of the school for youth be organized around four major purposes to assist youth in (1) establishing goals and values which they understand and accept, (2) gaining a basic understanding of the underlying concepts and values of our common heritage, (3) acquiring the skills necessary for participation in the culture, and (4) acquiring the competencies needed in order to be able to make a unique contribution to society. For purposes of instruction consistent with the purposes of areas 1 and 2, it is proposed that students be organized into age-grade groups of twenty to twenty-five students each with a teacher-counselor assigned to each group. Each group of students should represent, as near as possible, a complete cross-section of the socio-economic sub-cultures represented in the school. This is necessary in order to avoid perpetuating the isolation experienced outside of school, and to make it possible for youth to learn what people who differ from themselves are like, to learn the meaning of the pluralistic nature of our society, and to gain skill in working and communicating with all kinds of people.

The teachers and counselors for areas 1 and 2 will be organized into teacher-counselor teams by age-grade level for planning purposes. The ratio of teacher-counselors to students should be not more than 1-25, preferably 1-20. The age-grade level teams will select the problem areas, and content themes to be included in the work of the students in the age group, and develop resource units for use by the teaching teams in developing the specific teaching units to be used with groups of students.

For teaching purposes the age-grade teacher-counselor teams will be organized into teaching teams, each team assigned to a group of approximately one hundred students. Each team should include one qualified teacher for English (language arts), Social Studies, and humanities, and the services of one qualified guidance counselor assigned to two teaching teams, and one or more teacher aids. Each member of the team should be specially qualified for work with youth, especially disadvantaged youth, on problems of concern to youth.

Students should devote approximately one third of their time, each year, to work in these two curriculum areas. The time should be scheduled as a block, with the specific time allotments within the block determined from week to week by the teaching teams.

For the work in curriculum area 3 - skills development - the students should be grouped according to individual needs and abilities, with most of the work being done in small groups and individually. Approximately one third of the students' work in school should be devoted to this area, with some doing more, and some less, depending on individual needs. The staff for this area would include one guidance specialist for each one hundred students, reading specialists (diagnosticians and clinicians), computational skills, specialists,

speech therapists, and others as determined by the needs of students.

For the work in curriculum area 4 - depth study and specialization - the students should be organized into special interest groups. Approximately one third of the students' time in school should be devoted to work in this area. The staff for the area should be organized into departmental (team) groups for each special interest included in the area. Among the special interest offerings to be included are:

I. Vocational and pre-vocational sequences such as:

1. Construction trades
2. Auto mechanics
3. Farm mechanics
4. Distributive occupations
5. Electronics technicians
6. Health services
7. Office workers (clerical-secretarial)
8. Beauticians and Barbers

As far as possible the work in vocational preparations should be organized as a cooperative work-study program.

II. Sequences in the academic descriptives to provide opportunites for youth who expect to continue their education in college or technical school, as well as non-college bound students who need further work in the disciplines as a part of their general education. Among others, sequences should be provided in:

1. English
2. Social Sciences
3. Foreign Languages

4. Mathematics
5. Natural Sciences
6. The fine and practical arts

In-Service Education

Staff Qualifications:

In addition to the special qualifications needed by different members of the staff to perform the special services to which they are assigned, all members of the staff should be capable of communicating effectively with youth in the language of youth. They should understand the concepts and perceptions which youth have acquired from the experiences they have had, and how to utilize these concepts and perceptions as resources for promoting learning. Without such understandings the teachers cannot develop programs of experiences for youth which are relevant to reality as perceived by youth.

To achieve such understandings will require an intensive and continuing program of in-service education for teachers. Among other things this program should center attention on studying the sub-cultures from which youth come, the perceptions which youth have of their own reality and the reality of others, and the motivations of youth; sensitivity training designed to make teachers aware of their own perceptions and behavior in relationship to others - particularly students; and systematic efforts to develop content materials, and plan experiences relevant to the realities of youth in relationship to their learning needs in the world at large.

To implement the in-service program needed will require:

1. A faculty and staff sufficient in number to make it possible to schedule the in-service activities as a part of the regular work day.

2. The services as consultants and/or regularly employed resource people including:

   a) social psychologists

   b) social case workers

   c) curriculum designers

   d) sociologists and/or cultural anthropologists

   e) adult education specialists

   f) research and evaluation specialists

   g) and others as the program develops.